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Published on H-CivWar (August, 2023)

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When one of the characters in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is asked how he went bankrupt, he replies, “Gradually and then suddenly.” Historiographic trends often seem to follow a similar pattern. The transnational history of Reconstruction is a case in point. For at least two decades, historians of Reconstruction have faced calls to expand the scope of their field—to break free from well-worn regional and national frameworks and investigate the little-studied transnational dimensions of post-Civil War US history. Progress was slow at first. Manifestos and position papers outnumbered full-fledged monographs. As recently as 2018, David Prior lamented that the “transnational turn ... has had comparatively little influence on the study of Reconstruction.”[1] But over the last five years historians have finally gotten down to business, producing a series of illuminating studies based on polyglot research in archives around the Atlantic world.[2] Gradually and then suddenly, the transnational turn in Reconstruction history has arrived. Far from signaling bankruptcy, it has breathed new life into the field. However, every historiographic turn brings both opportunities and potential risks. In our eagerness to employ new methods and assimilate new data, we historians have to be careful not to lose sight of our most basic duty: explaining the past.

In his new book *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas*, Evan C. Rothera makes a thought-provoking contribution to the growing field of transnational Reconstruction history. *Civil Wars and Reconstructions* begins with a tantalizing insight. Between 1860 and 1880, the United States, Mexico, and Argentina all experienced a broadly similar sequence of political developments. First, civil wars erupted between liberal centralizers (US Republicans, Mexican Liberals, and Argentine Unitarios) and conservative federalists (Confederates, Mexican Conservatives, Argentine Federales). In each country, liberal centralizers won, inaugurating ambitious programs of political and social reform—in a word, of “reconstruction.” However, liberal victories on the battlefield failed to trans-
late into stable, durable liberal states. Defeated conservatives resisted reconstruction efforts tooth and nail, seeking to restore older social hierarchies. Finally, after years of debilitating conflict, liberals in each country abandoned their most radical aims and retreated into a more exclusionary politics that prioritized order and stability over equality and democracy.

What should we make of these striking parallels? Rothera approaches this question from two different methodological angles, with mixed success. In part 1, “Transnational Histories of Pan-American Cooperation,” he uses the tools of connective history to trace the circulation of people and ideas among the United States, Mexico, and Argentina. Chapter 1 explores the phenomenon of “transnational warriors.” These were roving freedom fighters who took part in foreign military struggles for ideological reasons—not, Rothera insists, out of a mercenary desire for money or glory. Chapter 2 considers the Second French Intervention in Mexico (1861-67) as a moment of “profound Pan-American cooperation” (p. 52). During their struggle against French invaders, Mexican Liberals lobbied the United States for aid on the grounds that the two nations were “sister republics.” To this end, Mexicans reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine—that founding assertion of US hemispheric hegemony—as a charter of inter-American mutual defense. Chapter 3 documents a curious phenomenon. In the years after the Civil War, people in Mexico and Argentina regularly staged public celebrations on US Independence Day (sometimes in coordination with local US consuls). Rothera interprets these celebrations as sincere professions of “Pan-American kinship” (p. 76). Chapter 4 focuses on the transnational career of Argentine statesman and intellectual Domingo Sarmiento. Sarmiento was a kind of Latin American Tocqueville. He spent many years in the United States, where he became an admirer of New England’s system of universal public education (which he tried to export to Argentina). Rothera sees Sarmiento’s ideas about public education and democracy as characteristic of the shared, essentially whiggish vision of development that was espoused by liberal reconstructors throughout the Americas in the 1860s and 1870s.

For Rothera, these myriad transnational connections reveal an important truth: mid-nineteenth-century struggles over free labor and democracy did not occur in a vacuum. They were separate theaters of a single, interlinked struggle, one that pitted “republicanism and democracy against forces of reaction” throughout the Americas (p. 4). Scholars studying the United States, Mexico, and Argentina in isolation have tended to miss the hemispheric scope of this struggle. But as Rothera notes, mid-nineteenth-century liberals themselves had no such myopia. To them, it was obvious that their individual battles against hierarchy and privilege were merely local variations on a transnational theme. Republicans, Liberals, Unitarios: all saw themselves as members of what Harper’s Weekly called “the great liberal party of the world” (p. 101). At the same time, all felt a powerful sense of linked fate about the future of popular government. A threat to one American republic was a threat to all.

Rothera is a skilled practitioner of connective history. His many well-chosen examples highlight not only the frequency but also the sheer diversity of the connections that linked the struggles for liberal democracy in the mid-nineteenth century United States, Mexico, and Argentina. Rothera’s discussion of Domingo Sarmiento and education—the highlight of this book, in my view—offers a model for how to do transnational intellectual history.[3] That said, some of the analyses in part 1 feel a touch underdeveloped. For example, I doubt that most of the “transnational warriors” described in chapter 1 were quite the selfless “soldiers of freedom” Rothera makes them out to be (p. 42). My own research on Americans who traveled to Cuba to fight for the pro-independence
side during the Ten Years’ War (1868-78) has revealed a range of different motivations, from ideological affinity to greed to simple wanderlust. Moreover, these motivations overlapped; individual freedom fighters enlisted in foreign struggles for complex and shifting reasons. Even the most forthrightly ideological “transnational warriors” were often responding to other, baser motivations as well.

Likewise, Rothera’s analysis of Independence Day celebrations in Mexico and Argentina in chapter 3 lacks a certain nuance. Rothera views these celebrations as straightforward expressions of inter-American solidarity. But public rituals are rarely so one-dimensional. It seems likely that these celebrations held different meanings for different groups of participants. Naturally, US diplomats saw these rituals as pro-US demonstrations; but these same rituals may have held other, more subversive meanings for the ordinary Mexicans and Argentines who took part. Here, it is worth considering the nature of Rothera’s source base. In part 1, Rothera relies heavily on consular dispatches. Anyone who has worked with these sources knows what a rich store of observations and insights they are, especially for transnational history. At the same time, however, consular dispatches have their blindspots and biases. Few groups are more disposed to see what they want to see than diplomats. For that reason, it’s important to read dispatches alongside sources produced by the inhabitants of the country and for a domestic audience. My hunch is that if Rothera had delved more deeply into Mexican and Argentine sources, he would have uncovered a more multifaceted picture of what celebrations of US Independence Day meant south of the Rio Grande.

In part 2 of Civil Wars and Reconstructions, “Comparative Paths to Order,” Rothera turns from connective history to comparative history. If part 1 was concerned with tracing specific connections among the United States, Mexico, and Argentina, part 2 highlights more general points of similarity. Chapter 5 explores political disorder in the United States, Mexico, and Argentina during the 1860s. Rothera observes that disorder occurred for similar reasons in all three countries (above all, political centralization) and manifested in similar forms (paramilitary violence, electoral fraud). Chapter 6 surveys how central governments responded to political disorder. For a time at least, the United States, Mexico, and Argentina all acted vigorously to suppress rebellion, shore up national sovereignty, and vindicate liberal ideas. But these muscular, statist responses proved short-lived. Chapter 7 relates how reconstructors in the three countries eventually gave up on trying to suppress disorder and enforce liberal reforms through coercion. Instead, liberal centralizers made peace with conservative federalists, giving in to demands for minority rule in exchange for order and stability. In effect, liberals across the Americas struck their own local versions of what C. Vann Woodward (referring to the end of Reconstruction in the United States) famously called “The Compromise of 1877.”[4]

Part 2 is less successful than part 1. Its problems lie deeper, in that they have to do with Rothera’s application of the comparative method itself. The purpose of comparative history is not simply to catalogue similarities and differences between societies; rather, it is to explain why the same historical process can have different outcomes in different societies. Comparative historians begin with a question—for example, why did post-emancipation society take such different forms in the sugar districts of Louisiana and Cuba?[5] They compare cases in order to isolate the independent variables—to reveal what is unique (and thus analytically salient) about each case. Armed with this data, they advance a general hypothesis about why a given historical process unfolded differently in different societies. The problem with Rothera’s approach to comparative history in part 2 is that it never quite makes the leap from observation to
systematic explanation. Rothera registers numerous similarities (and a few differences) among the United States, Mexico, and Argentina, but for the most part he does not attempt to explain these similarities and differences in any sustained way. Why did civil wars and reconstructions in these three countries unfold as they did? What can these cases tell us about the process of postwar stabilization generally? Rothera is largely silent on these questions. As a result, the exposition in part 2 is almost wholly narrative; what analysis it offers is incidental. It also has a curiously siloed quality. Thus, Rothera offers detailed summaries of developments in the United States, Mexico, and Argentina by turns, without ever weaving them together into a coherent analytical whole. The case studies remain separate panels in a triptych—juxtaposed rather than synthesized. Ultimately, I cannot help but think that Civil Wars and Reconstructions would have been a more successful book if Rothera had stuck with connective history throughout, instead of trying to serve two methodological masters.

The transnational turn in Reconstruction history has arrived, at long last. But in the future, whether historians make use of connective history, or comparative history, or both, we need to think carefully about the analytical stakes of our work. Cataloging transnational connections and highlighting transnational parallels are important first steps—but they are just that. Going forward, we must also be prepared to explain why these connections and parallels matter, how they change the way we think about the Americas in the mid-nineteenth century. In short, we need to give due attention to matters of research design and method. Such self-reflection does not always come easily—especially during the heady early days of a new historiographic revolution. But it is the essential hallmark of a mature field.

Notes


[3]. The peripatetic Sarmiento lends himself to this kind of history. See also Juliet Hooker, Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter 2.


[5] This question frames one of the more successful (relatively) recent works of comparative history, Rebecca J. Scott’s Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
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